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ABSTRACT

To test a hypothesis that a positive improvement in attitudes and perceptions of Mexicans and Mexican Americans would result from a special curriculum unit pertaining to Mexican and Mexican American culture, 154 Anglo American and Mexican American children enrolled in 6 sixth-grade classes in Chandler, Arizona, were randomly assigned to control or experiment conditions for 4 weeks of special curricular study of Mexican culture. Teachers were allowed to implement the unit ("A Bicultural Heritage" by Schon) in their own style. The effect of the curricular study on perceptions of Mexican Americans was studied by having students respond anonymously to an attitude inventory. The perceptions of Mexican Americans by Mexican Americans were not highly positive: however, the perceptions of the Mexican American group were much higher than those of the Anglo group, whose responses were negative almost as often as they were positive. The means of all groups decreased progressively throughout the study, and the posttest means were significantly lower that the pretest means for all groups. Apparently, the promise of anonymity caused the students to feel more secure and free to express negative attitudes. Test results indicated that cultural and ethnic attitudes are developed over a period of years and may not be easily changed through short term curriculum development projects. (CM)

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The Effects of Special Curricular Study of Mexican Culture On Anglo and Mexican-American Students' Perceptions of Mexican-Americans*

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Background and Purpose

Commercial bicultural or multicultural educational materials are being produced and sold in unprecedented numbers in many schools and libraries in the United States but their effects are often taken for granted rather than being carefully researched (Slavin & Madden, 1979). The purpose of this study is to determine whether a special curriculum unit pertaining to Mexican and Mexican-American culture (Schon, 1978) affects the attitudes and stereotypes of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans held by Anglo and Mexican-American students. It was hypothesized that a positive improvement in the attitudes and perceptions of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans would result after being exposed to activities, readings, discussions, and curricular study concerning Mexican and Mexican-American customs, lifestyles, heroes, folklore, and history.

Program Description

The six sixth-grade teachers in the two schools were provided with a copy of a curricular guide, A Bicultural Heritage (Schon, 1978) which includes themes for the exploration of Mexican and Mexican-American culture for children and adolescents. This publication includes specific learnings that students may be expected to acquire as a result of the suggested readings, discussions, experiences, and evaluation of ideas and follow-up

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activities. Teachers in the experiment (E) groups were told to select one theme per week from this curricular guide and to use, with their "special social studies group," the books and audio-visual material about Mexico, Mexicans, and Mexican-Americans that were provided for their use in the library at each school. The duration of the treatment was four weeks--one-half hour of curricular study (reading, discussion, and activities) twice a week.

The teachers were allowed to implement the treatment in their own style. Although a more rigidly structured treatment has certain definite advantages as far as external validity is concerned, teacher flexibility in the curricular implementation is characteristic in the ecological validity context to which the results purpose to generalize, hence teachers were allowed to operate "naturalistically" in the study. The particular emphasis and style of each teacher were monitored and are briefly summarized in the Appendix.

Subjects

The subjects for this study were 154 Anglo-American and Mexican-American children 11 to 13 years of age enrolled in six sixth-grade classes in two elementary schools in Chandler, Arizona. One school is situated in a poverty area; 67 percent of the children attending this school are Mexican-Americans. The other school is situated in a middle-class area; approximately 85 percent of the children are from middle income homes. Most of the remainder are migrant children. Approximately 20 percent of the children

in the second school are Mexican-Americans. On the California Achievement Test, 25 percent and 48 percent of the students at the two respective schools equaled or exceeded the national median in total reading.

Procedure

The study is a true experiment, contrasting the perceptions and attitudes of two groups of sixth-grade students: those randomly assigned to the experimental (E) groups and comparable students randomly assigned to the control (C) groups.

The research design is summarized below in Campbell-Stanley notation:

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R O O X O

One-third of the students within each of the three classes at each school were randomly assigned to one of two treatment classes or to the control class. During the study the control classes had study time and had no direct instruction related to the Mexican culture. During the second four weeks of the study the E and the C groups were reversed. To control for possible instrumentation artifacts from the teachers' involvement in test administration and other factors, all students were tested together in their regular classes by one of the authors.

Criterion Measure

Since no appropriate measures of perceptions and attitudes toward Mexican-Americans existed, the authors developed the Perceptions of Mexican-

Americans Scale (PMAS). Items were constructed or adapted from other related scales for use in a Mexican-American context. Illustrative PMAS items include: "Most Mexican-Americans are". . ."honest people". . . "easy to like". . ."slow and dull". . ."very superstitious". . ."very lazy". . ."not very clean." Examinees responded on a three-point scale: "Yes", "?", and "No".

Validity and Reliability

Various procedures were employed to evaluate each of the items and to establish the reliability and validity of the PMAS. All items were reviewed and refined by a Mexican-American educator and a psychometrician for content validity and appropriateness of wording and level of vocabulary.

Students responded anonymously and were admonished to "please be completely honest" and told that "No one will know which paper is yours. We need to know exactly how kids feel." (In order to be able to match-up pre- and posttest and yet maintain anonymity each student wrote his mother's maiden name on the text.)

A seven-item response validity (RV) scale was imbedded into the PMAS to ascertain whether the group would tend to acquiesce to any perceived "social desirability" or implicit "demand characteristics" of the situation. This RV scale included items such as, "All Mexican-Americans are". . . "always nice to other kids". . ."easy to like". . ."always fair."

The 24-items of the preliminary version of PMAS were field tested on 102 sixth-grade students at a school not involved in the study. The

associated classroom teachers were asked to, in confidence, identify any students perceived to have particularly positive or negative attitudes toward Mexican-Americans. These ratings thus became a crude, three-point external criterion against which each of the PMAS items could be correlated and validated. It is evident that this criterion is of limited value since the contexts in which teachers can observe students provide limited opportunity for attitudes to be expressed in behavior. Indeed, the teachers' presence should inhibit instances of negative behavior.

The 24 PMAS items had satisfactory reliability ($\hat{\rho}_{xx} = .77$, $\hat{\sigma}_e = 3.2$) in spite of the fact that three of the items functioned poorly. These items were revised on the final version of PMAS.

Most of the PMAS items had very low but positive correlations with the teachers' ratings. The total PMAS correlated only .1 with teachers' ratings, which, as previously stated, probably reflects, at least in part, that teachers do not know students' true attitudes. This conclusion is supported by the fact that the teachers' ratings were no higher for the Mexican-Americans than for the Anglo students. In addition, the T-scale reflected general honesty in responding, which probably was greatly enhanced by the acknowledged anonymity of the respondents.

In the actual study, the Hoyt reliability estimates of the 24-item PMAS were very high--.86, .91, and .92 for the pretest and posttest I, and posttest II respectively. The associated reliability estimates for

the seven-item truth-scale were also substantial--.76, .75, and .80. Only one of the seven RV scale items had a higher mean (scaled in the positive direction) than any of the 24 actual PMAS items, thus supporting a substantial degree of honesty in the students' responses. In addition, the correlation between PMAS and RV scale was almost identical in each group (approximately .4), thus supporting the validity of E versus C comparisons.

Results

Several different multifactor analyses of covariance were performed to study the interrelationships among the factors of treatment, ethnicity, sex, and teacher. The pretest served as a covariate to increase statistical power--it reduced the error mean square slightly more than fifty percent (the correlations between the pretest and the immediate and delayed post-tests were .72 and .75 respectively). Descriptive statistical data for the principal factors of the study are given in Table 1. The 24 PMAS items were each scored -1 for the undesirable response, 0 for a neutral response, and +1 for the desired answer. Thus, the highest and theoretically ideal score is 24; the score which represents the most extreme negative stereotype would be -24. "Effect size" (ES) expresses the difference in the two means in standard deviation units.

Insert Table 1

Table 1

Means and "Effect Sizes" (ES) for Comparison Groups

		Pretest		Posttest I		Posttest II	
Group	n	$\bar{X}$	ES[a]	$\bar{X}$	ES	$\bar{X}$	ES
Experimental	59	7.0	-.04	5.3	-.02	3.2	-.17
Control[b]	31	7.4		5.4		5.0	
Mexican-Americans	27	11.0	.66*	10.2	.67*	8.2	.59*
Anglos	63	5.4		3.2		2.0	
Girls	44	6.7	-.11	6.5	.23	4.8	.19
Boys	46	7.6		4.1		2.8	

[a] $ES = (\bar{X}_i - \bar{X}_j)/s$

[b] Control group is actually a delayed-treatment group which received the treatment between posttests I and II.

* $p < .05$

A very surprising result is evident in Table 1--the means of all groups decreased progressively throughout the study, which if taken at face value, would indicate declining attitudes for all groups (including the Mexican-American pupils) over the course of the study. However, the decline appears to result from more honest and candid responses on successive administrations of the PMAS--students began to feel more secure and free to express negative attitudes without self-jeopardy. This conclusion is supported by the pattern of means on the response validity scale; the means on the seven social desirability (RV) items showed the responses were progressively more truthful from the pretest to the posttest II.

There was no significant difference between the two treatment groups on either posttest. The observed difference between E and C groups on posttest I is very nearly zero, suggesting that the non-signficant result is probably not attributable to insufficient power. The absence of a treatment difference was consistent for all teachers, ethnic groups and sexes--there were no significant interactions between treatment and the three other factors. (Separate analyses with each PMAS item serving as the dependent variable revealed that the pattern of results was consistent for all 24 items.) As expected, the mean of the Mexican-American (MA) pupils is much higher than the Anglo (A) mean. The perceptions of Mexican-Americans by Mexican-Americans were not highly positive; the ideal response was selected only by 34 percent of the students, on the average. Still the

perceptions of the MA group were much higher than those of the Anglo group whose responses were almost as often negative as they were positive. In an absolute sense the MA pupils do not have a strongly positive stereotype of Mexican-Americans, although it is much less negative than the Anglo pupils' stereotype of Mexican-Americans.

The means of the male and female students did not differ significantly in any of the three comparisons, although the decline in the boys' mean was significantly greater (point-biserial correlations, with pretest partialed out were .225 and .205 for posttest I and II respectively).

Discussion

Cultural and ethnic attitudes are developed through experiences and one's environment over a period of years. It may be simplistic to assume that these attitudes will be easily changed through short-term curricular "packages" and special emphases designed for this purpose.

Summary

Anglo and Mexican-American students in six sixth-grade classrooms were randomly assigned to control or experiment conditions (four weeks of special curricular study of Mexican culture). The effect of the treatment on perceptions of Mexican-Americans was studied by having students respond anonymously to an attitude inventory.

The posttest means were significantly lower than the pretest means for all groups, apparently as a consequence of greater honesty in responding.

There were significant differences in the ethnic group means, but not treatment or sex difference. Ethnic attitudes appear more difficult to change than is implicit from many curriculum development projects.

APPENDIX

Teacher Variations in Treatment Implementation

Teacher I enjoys reading herself and she enjoyed reading about Mexico. However the students in her treatment group were not interested in reading nor in sharing what they read. She showed several filmstrips about Mexico that were apparently liked by the students. She also read aloud one book to the group.

Teacher II felt that there was not enough time to prepare for a unit on Mexico. Many of the students in his treatment group do not like to read and very few read any of the books about Mexico or Mexican-American people. The students enjoyed the discussions on Mexican history, civilization, and religion and talking in Spanish during this time.

Teacher III immediately went to the school library and took approximately twenty-five books about Mexican and Mexican-American people to his classroom. He read A Bicultural Heritage and encouraged all of his students in his regular classroom to read and write a brief annotation of each book. His regular students enjoyed sharing their thoughts and feelings about the books and participated in the discussions about Mexico's poverty and how oil might help Mexico. However, in his delayed-treatment group he experienced a very different response. These students were not interested in reading nor in any of the discussions that he initiated. With the exception of three students that seemed to have a better understanding of Mexican culture, he felt that he did not accomplish anything with his delayed treatment group.

Teacher IV took an imaginary trip to Mexico City with her treatment group. She showed several filmstrips on Mexico and noticed that the

Mexican-American boys were very reserved in the beginning, but later on the Mexican-American boys participated enthusiastically and shared their experiences in Mexico. The students enjoyed many of the fun activites that she planned, such as, making Mexican fudge, and eating fresh pineapple and bananas.

Teacher V and the principal of the school decided to work together with this treatment group. They started out by having the students investigate several aspects of Mexican history, people, music, etc. They showed and discussed filmstrips of Mexican schools, people, and places. The teacher noted that a Mexican girl in her class "really blossomed." She enjoyed helping the teacher pronounce the Spanish words and telling the group about Mexican people. All the children enjoyed eating Mexican food (tortillas, beans, honey and butter) and listening to a Mexican"mariachi" band.

Teacher VI questioned whether it was really necessary for him to work on a "unit on Mexico" with the delayed-treatment group. (He had had a control group during the first four weeks of the treatment in which the children were working on their family trees.) He met with the group a total of 1 1/2 hours (all other treatment groups met a total of 4 hours) and had discussions on Mexican history and geography. He noticed that the students liked going to their treatment groups and were interested in the discussions.

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